

19 May 2022

Sent via email to themail@newyorker.com

To the Editor:

We read with interest Maya Jasanoff's article, "Our Obsession with Ancestry Has Some Twisted Roots," in the May 9, 2022 issue. We want to thank you for highlighting genealogy and its popularity in the United States and across the world. We cannot argue with Ms. Jasanoff's historical synopsis of the history of genealogy, and its oft-exercised role as a reinforcement of superiority and power. However, we write today to offer a more optimistic viewpoint regarding the present and future state of genealogy.

Although some people do use genealogy to promote established and desired levels of status, today's genealogists strive to do the opposite: we seek to bring the real struggles and joys of everyday people to light. Genealogists, both professionals and hobbyists, provide a voice for the voiceless, those both living and departed.

Few of us have royal or influential ancestors, and those who do also have countless others who were largely forgotten by history. We descend from enslaved people, farmers, mill workers, soldiers, overworked mothers, and struggling immigrants. Their unglamorous lives are where the most powerful stories lie: in the daily strife of individuals who overcame adversity to create stable and productive lives for themselves, and to pass whatever nuggets of success they squirreled away towards future generations. The beauty of genealogy is that it allows us to learn about the bigger picture of history by focusing on individuals and their lives.

Professional genealogists reconstruct social histories of communities long-neglected by history books – from Calabrian immigrants in Utica, New York, to Chinese laborers working on the Transcontinental Railroad, to Native Americans forcibly removed to Oklahoma. We use crowdsourcing techniques to gather information about the lives of enslaved people whose names are barely recorded in historical records. We help adoptees learn about their health and personal history. We help the descendants of Holocaust victims and survivors learn the fates of their families and reclaim citizenships forcefully taken from them. We assist in the repatriation of remains of soldiers killed in action in order for them to receive a military burial. Genealogy gives solace to families who have endured untold trauma.

Family stories are sloppy, and themes of racism, inequality, and superiority run through them just as they do through our cultural history. Our discipline is inherently imperfect, as all disciplines are, but there is a good reason that it is popular. From our experiences working with countless clients, we know that the quest for ancestral identity is rarely rooted in a yearning for

superiority but is most commonly a bid for a deeper understanding of the struggles and sacrifices that were made by the people who came before us, no matter who they were. From those people, we have inherited something far more important than whatever money or power they may have held.

Sincerely,
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